

Charles and Helen Bacigalupi



**Charles & Helen Bacigalupi
2010**

Charles and Helen Bacigalupi

Interviewed by Vivienne Sosnowski

November 2010

Transcription: 2011

Wine Library Associates of Sonoma County

Healdsburg, California

2015

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Charles & Katey

Interview History

This interview took place over two days at the ranch of Charles and Helen Bacigalupi on Westside Road, just outside Healdsburg, California. The ranch is located on a rise in gentle hills overlooking the spectacular and winding Russian River. The Bacigalupi home is reached through a long and curving drive lined with mature trees. It is Thursday, November 18, 2010. The leaves on the vines surrounding the family home are golden, and it is expected that the wind and rain forecast for the next few days will strip the vines of their color and herald the beginning of winter in Sonoma's wine country. The Bacigalupi harvest is in. Charles and Helen Bacigalupi, who have a son and twin granddaughters now, are long-time residents of this famed grape growing area, and they grow highly esteemed grapes acclaimed by winemakers, other grape growers and wine drinkers alike. But when they moved to this home fifty years ago, neither Charles nor Helen would have foreseen that their grapes would become some of the most famous grapes in the history of American wine. We sit in the Bacigalupi's ranch house kitchen, where a roaring fire in a stove in the corner is crackling and making a fine heat as we talk.

Vivienne Sosnowski

Charles & Helen Bacigalupi

Interviewer: Vivienne Sosnowski

November 18, 2010

QUESTION: *Helen can you tell us a little about your family now, and after that we'll ask Charles about his childhood and family?*

Helen: There's really not much to talk about. My father was born in Iowa, and my grandmother divorced my grandfather when my father was just a small child, and so I don't know anything about the Longs—my maiden name was Long. My mother was born in Hungary and my father married my mother, I think, in Utah. But, my mother died when I was very small, an infant, so I don't know anything about my mother's side, either. But, my father's mother reared us three children. My father never liked to talk about my mother's passing, so I don't know much about it or how old I was, but I have a younger sister who lives in Utah and she's one year younger than I am. I think I was perhaps two or three when mother died, but I have no recollection of any of that.

QUESTION: *How did you get to California?*

Helen: I like to tell people we came with the Okies—you see I was born in 1925; I'll be 85 years old on December 31st, 2010. (Charles is two years older than Helen.) We were up in Idaho, and it was during the Depression, and everybody was looking for work, so we were moving all the time as my father tried to find work. We moved all the time. He originally worked in the oil fields in Wyoming, and then he was in mining and that sort of thing. We had a tough time during the Depression. A lot of young people don't know what tough times mean. I hear about tough times now, but it's nothing near to what the Depression was. Oh man, they have no idea. But, I was always very studious. I loved school, and I had an English teacher in high school, and she said if there is anybody here that wants to go to college, you can. She didn't say how you could do it... (*Laughing*) She just said you can, and a light went on, and I thought I'm going to try to go to college. So, I worked my way through school. It was very tough. I dropped out in my junior year during high school, and it was during the war, and so I had an aunt who lived in Los Angeles, so I went down there and lived with her

for a while and worked in a valve factory during the war. I worked there for a year, and I saved \$1,000 dollars. While I was there I worked the night shift, because we got five cents more per hour—the swing shift from 4 pm till 2 am in the morning. It doesn't sound like much today—\$1,000—but it was quite a bit of money in those days. Then, I tried to figure out how I could make a living for myself, and I decided I would like to be a pharmacist. To get the pre-pharmacy prerequisites, I came to Santa Rosa Junior College, because my folks were still living in Northern California, and I thought I would be closer to them, and there was no place in the end of Northern California where you could get that training beside the Santa Rosa JC. This was after the war (World War II) now. I quit my job the day the war ended. And my boss said, "I'd like to keep you on," and I said, "Thanks very much, but I've decided to go to college, but you could write me a recommendation letter," I said, which he did, which was helpful.

QUESTION: *Were you the first person in your family to go to college?*

Helen: Absolutely. Although, my grandmother did teach school, but you didn't have to have degrees in the early days to teach school. While my grandmother encouraged education, I still did it all on my own with no help. I often wonder how the heck that was possible. It was a privilege to be able to do it, especially with no money. I worked my way through college. I got to my senior year at Cal (UC San Francisco Medical Center), and I was running out of money, and they started a little loan program, so I borrowed some money and, as soon as I got out and got a job, I paid it back with interest. But, that was the first time I got any help. I met Charles at JC as he was back from the war. This was the fall of 1946, the war had ended in 1945. They had the GI Bill, so he didn't have to worry about money. We were taking zoology, and he came into the classroom—I was sitting at the front of the class, I'm not hard of hearing but I like to be close up to the speaker—and, he came and sat down, and none of us were trying to say these foot long zoology words, as it was impossible to pronounce them. Then, he came in, and he started reeling them off, and he stuttered over them something terrible. And, oh my god, I didn't want to

laugh, but it was so funny. Oh, it was so painful. (Laughter)

***QUESTION:** Charles, please tell us a little about your childhood—did your family have a farming background?*

Charles: Well, I didn't, but both sides of my family—I had aunts and uncles—many of them were in farming. My father and grandfather were grocers. They built the store Bacigalupi Market on Fourth Street in Santa Rosa. It's not there now; they built the freeway practically right over the top of it. We sold it to, I think, Union Oil. The store was only a block from the depot and, in those days, a lot of people still traveled by train. When they built the store, they put a hotel—the Lincoln Hotel—over the top of it. The entrance to the hotel was right next to our store. Our grocery store had a butcher at the east end of it, and Dad leased it to a family named Dont. And, then from the butcher shop to the corner stretched the grocery store.

***QUESTION:** Did it concentrate on selling Italian specialties?*

Charles: No, it was a big store. I worked in it during the holidays when I was a kid.

Helen: His grandfather had a winery, too, and it was down on the 7th Street property, but it was just an old barn.

Charles: They closed it up at Prohibition and never opened it up again. But, when I was a kid, people would bring their jugs into the store, and we would fill them up with wine. People came into the store to buy wine a lot. And, we bought wine by the barrel from Sebastiani and from Inglenook, but most of it from Sebastiani. I remember Inglenook being of fine quality. Dad also had liquor and wine in bottles, too. We had barrel racks inside the store with barrels on them. He had lots of choices for customers.

Helen: They used to call every red wine, when we started out, burgundy.

Charles: This is long before that. This is in the 20s and 30s. We bought wine from many different wineries, and Dad would have maybe three or four wines all called burgundy, but from different wineries. People would come in and bring their jugs or their bottles, and we'd fill them. It

didn't cost very much. I think a bottle fill-up was about two bits. But we also had containers, too, to sell, if they didn't bring their own.

Helen: When we were in college, down in San Francisco, and we'd come up here, and we'd go to Pedroncelli, and we'd bring a box of four one- gallon jugs, and Mr. Pedroncelli, the father of the boys who are there now, would fill our jugs—what did we pay then, a dollar, wasn't it?



Palace Hotel, 1947

Freshman Year in College

Charles: Yes, a dollar a gallon. And, this was the same wine they were putting in bottles with corks. It was top quality.

Helen: But, I think they just called it burgundy.

Charles: Sometimes they did call it Zinfandel, because that was a name they did use. But, not Pinot Noir or Cabernet. I never saw that.

Helen: Nobody even knew what they were in those days.

QUESTION: *Was that because they were making field blends in those days?*

Helen: This vineyard we have here was like that. It was making field blends. It was 85 years old when we bought it. I saw an agricultural census once, and it mentioned this vineyard right here, and it said it had Alicante, Zinfandel, Golden Chasselas—and I forget the rest—and they would have been picked all at the same time. Forget about what the sugar was!

Charles: There was also some Petite Sirah here when we bought it.

Helen: They just picked everything together, and put everything in together. The whites right in with the red. Of course, it was non-irrigated back then, and they didn't run the sugars up as they do now. I was looking at some old weight

tags. And, in fact, the wine that went to Paris (Helen is referring to what is now known as the Judgment of Paris, more on “Paris” later) wasn’t that high. I think it was 23 or 23 and a half, maybe.

Helen: 23, I think.

***QUESTION:** Once you graduated from university, was it easy to get established?*

Helen: A friend I had known at Cal—he was at the JC, too—well, he was at the county hospital in Santa Rosa, and he said, “Our chief pharmacist here has had a nervous breakdown, and we wondered if you could come and fill in for him?” And, I said, “I guess I could try.” So, that got me to Sonoma County.

Charles: I passed my Boards, too, and one of my teachers was a dentist, and his father was a dentist, and they both practiced here in Healdsburg, and his Dad had built a bungalow office, and he had one more space in there, and he asked me if I’d like to take it, and I said yes, because my mother’s family was from Healdsburg.

Helen: When we first got married, we looked for a house in town. We couldn’t find a house to buy or rent or anything, and they’d already started scheduling patients for Charles, so Charles told Eddie Beeson, “You know we can’t find a place to live in Healdsburg.” The office was right next to the Healdsburg Museum—that little stucco place. That’s where he was for 39 years. So, Eddie said, “We’ve got a little guest house out on the ranch. Maybe you could live there until you find a place? So we lived there for about six months, nearly froze to death. *(Laughing)* So, we stayed there till we found a place in town.

***QUESTION:** How did you come to own this ranch and start grape growing?*

Helen: Well, with Charles being a dentist in Healdsburg and me a pharmacist for five years, we bought a nice house in Healdsburg, and we always thought we might live here. Charles’ aunt lived out on Dry Creek Road for years, and her grandson is still there on the property. But, we thought after a while that we would like to get into the country and not live in Healdsburg. So, we kept looking and didn’t see anything, but finally one

day—Charles rented his office all the time, he was there for 39 years, from the Beesons—and Eddie Beeson said one day, “Charlie, I heard that the Goddard place is for sale. You ought to go out and have a look at it. So, we came out and . . . “

Charles: We talked to the Goddards.

Helen: Yes, the Goddards were here in the original place, and I said the first thing I want to know is where are you getting your water, because I am a country girl, and I knew that if there wasn’t any water, that there wouldn’t be any use thinking about anything, and we’d have to go right back to town. So, she showed us a beautiful spring that they got their water from, and we tasted the water, and it was good, and we said we liked it, and we said we thought we would buy the ranch. So, we bought 121 acres for \$30,000 on April 1, 1956. At first we thought it was a 133-acre parcel, but a survey had not been done forever, and when it was done, the land turned out to be 121 acres.



Looking South from the House in 1956

Charles: It had been for sale for almost a year with a realtor in San Rafael, and their agreement with him still had one month to run.

Helen: It was an exclusive.

Charles: And, part of the reason the price was 30 was—they were asking a little more, but...

Helen: They were asking 35.

Charles: Was because they were waiting for the contract to be over, and they wouldn’t have to pay a realtor’s commission. Because, then the realtor would have nothing to do with it. So, we kept our fingers crossed for a month, and at the end of the month, that was it. We bought it.

QUESTION: *Did you move out here right away?*

Helen: No, not right away. It took us until the end of the year to get organized, and



. **Shop, Barn & Shed in 1956**
we moved in here a little bit before Christmas of 56

QUESTION: *Did you have children then?*

Helen: No, our son was born in 1958.



John Bacigalupi on Peggy

Helen: When we bought the place, it was still all in fruit trees, mostly prunes. Craggy things. But the fruit that was here was fabulous. Oh, god it was fabulous. Peaches. Apricots. Figs. There were about two acres of cherries, which we actually harvested for about five years. There were some vineyards here.

Charles: The Goddards had been on the property for about a hundred years. They were really nice people.

Helen: Oh yes, absolutely, or longer. And, we know Bob Silzle, too. His mother was a sister to James Goddard, I think, who had just died... or maybe that was another generation. But, anyway, that was the ranch across the road, and we've known Bob for over 50 years. I do have a history of the Goddard family, and they were on this property for over 100 years, and I imagine they homesteaded, that would be my guess. Five generations of them lived here before we bought this property. And, after we bought the ranch, they became patients of Charles. Except for James Goddard, he had already died. He was never your patient was he?

Charles: No, but they became patients after we bought the ranch.

Helen: The Goddards made their living here, except for Jim's wife. She taught at Felta School, I am sure for all her life, I think. Probably to pay the bills, I expect, like the electricity bill. Jim was a blacksmith. He was in World War I, and he probably wasn't very well all his life, but on the other hand they went through Prohibition. They tore out vineyards, in fact, we know they did or they just died out, but we do know they had had more vineyards here before Prohibition. Farm advisers had suggested people get rid of some of the vines during Prohibition, because they didn't know how long it was going to last. And, they were advised to plant fruit trees among the vines and/or instead of the vines. The northern part of the ranch had been in vineyards, too, but not when we bought it. But, you could still see the little bumps where the vines had been.

Charles: They were taking care of around 20 acres of vineyards, and we kept it going.

Helen: Yes, we only got \$50 a ton for the grapes we sold.

Charles: That was for the Zin. The whites were \$25.

Helen: Yes, it wasn't much money. We weren't making any money off of grapes. I don't even know if they paid the taxes.

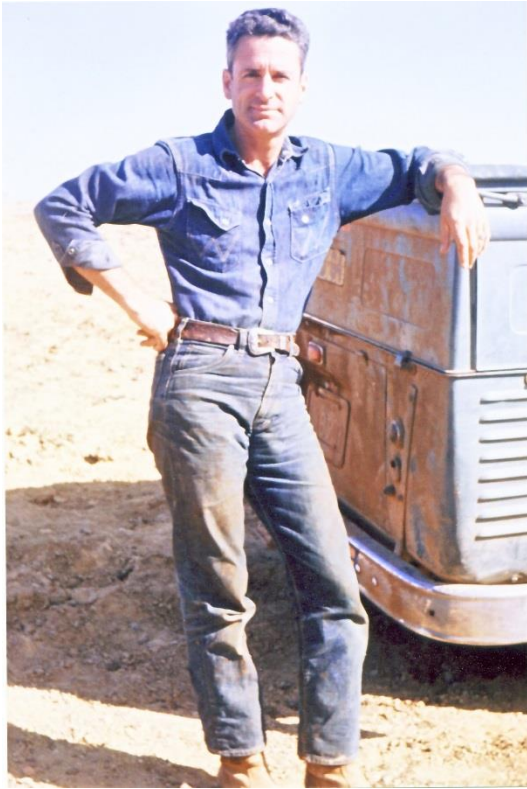
Charles: Yes, it paid the taxes.

Helen: They were growing Missions, Zin and Golden Chasselas. I think the Missions were on their own root, because one year they just all keeled over. The whole thing. We wondered what happened, and then we realized we hadn't seen any rootstock coming up, and that was the reason. But, we were lucky through this to know Bob Sisson, who was a patient of Charles.

Charles: He was the grape adviser and also was the head of UC Davis Extension.

Helen: He was alive till very recently. After a few years here, then things started to pick up, and they started to pay us a bit more than \$50, so we thought, well, maybe we should take some of the

pasture out and plant some grapes, so Charles asked Bob in about 1963/4 what he would plant here, if he were to plant a new vineyard. And Bob said, “You know, you should plant Chardonnay and Pinot Noir here for this climate.” We said that nobody was growing these



Charles Bacigalupi—1964

varieties here at that time, and we said we don't know where we would get budwood for that, and he said, “Tell you what, why don't you go down to Livermore to Carl Wente, and see if he'll sell you some budwood.”

Charles: We eventually got the rootstock from Bill Wallace in West Dry Creek, who was growing St. George rootstock. Both Helen and I had gone to the JC in Santa Rosa after the war, and we had met Bill there. Bill's folks had a ranch about, oh, three-quarters of a mile from Madrona Knoll, which they call Madrona Manor now. They had a ranch there, and Bill was, at that time, running it, and he was a graduate of Davis. I think he was an only child. The Wallaces had mostly prunes then, but there would have been some grapes. And, Bill started a nursery for great rootstock, and of course, we were friends. We got our St. George rootstock from him. Bill also grew vegetables. He experimented with different things. Eventually, he got tired of farming and moved to Idaho and opened a hardware store.

Helen: In those days there were no nurseries that were planting bench-grafted grape vines. You had to plant the rootstock. Also, we didn't have drip irrigation. But, St. George rootstock would survive without irrigation. Even in the first year, it's so very deep rooted, that's what's great about St. George.

Charles: We planted it one year and then you field-budded it the next year.

Helen: And Joe Rochioli, Jr., was the only one around here who knew how to field-bud so he field-budded our first Pinot Noir and Chardonnay blocks.

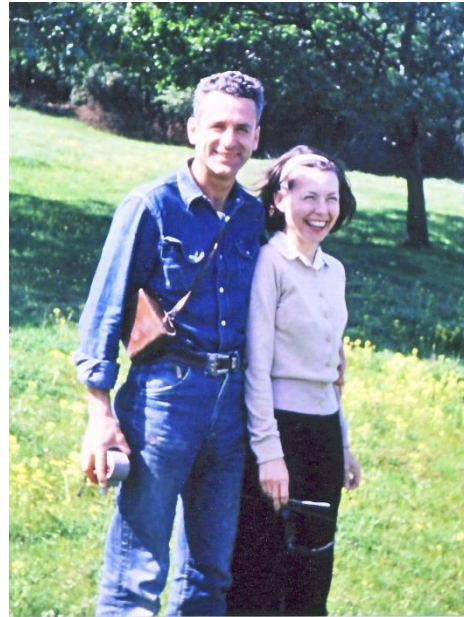
QUESTION: *Did he know about Pinot Noir back then?*

Helen: No, and the story he told us was that after doing ours, was that he thought, “I think I’ll plant some of that myself,” and he went down, I think, to Carl Wente and said, “I’d like to buy some bud wood from you” and Carl Wente says, “No, I don’t think I want to sell you any.” And Joe said, “Yes, you have to because I’m selling you grapes.” So he got some. *(Laughing)*. And he’s been growing it ever since, too. Joe was very young then. And I knew his father and the mother, too.

QUESTION: *So then you got your Pinot and Chardonnay going?*

Charles: Yes, we got them going—but just small blocks. Let’s see, we took the cherries out. And planted those acres to Pinot Noir and that’s about two acres.

And we planted that other piece . . . my guess is that we planted about four acres of each.



Charles & Helen—April 1965

Helen: Not very much. We didn’t jump in wholesale, as you didn’t know if you were going to be able to sell them or not.

Charles: Well, by that time the wine thing was starting to take off.

Helen: And, of course, it takes about three years to get a crop. So, nothing happens overnight.

Charles: But by the time they came in, they were in demand. It was great timing.

Yes, they went from \$50, to \$75, then to \$100! That kind of perks you up.

QUESTION: *What was happening out there in the market at that time?*

Helen: Well, I'll tell you. We sold first to Foppiano, and then we sold some to Seghesio. And I don't remember about Foppiano and Seghesio, but no one here could ever tell you how much they could pay you. No one knew how much they could pay until they knew what Gallo would pay them for the bulk wine. So you never knew what you were going to get clear to the end of the year for the grapes. You just took whatever they could give you.

Charles: You'd just check in with them around Thanksgiving. You didn't know what you were going to get till you got paid.

Helen: But, then Rod Strong came in.

Charles: Boy, did he shake it up.

Helen: And, he gave us the first written contract we ever had with the price and payment schedule and the whole works.

QUESTION: *So Rodney Strong changed things around here?*

Charles: Yes, he came from New York. He was a ballet dancer. He was really a very fine ballet dancer, and not just a dancer, I believe he had something to do with producing ballet, too.

Helen: Choreographing or something.

Charles: And, that's how he and Peter Friedman met in New York. Peter was high up in some marketing organization and they actually started Windsor Vineyards, Peter and Rod Strong did. By that time, the Co-op was closed and they started Windsor Vineyards in the old Co-op winery in Windsor.

Helen: Because it had folded by that time.

Charles: Then Rod Strong bought some land just opposite us near the river. He died last year.

QUESTION: *So did he revolutionize things around here?*

Helen: Absolutely. By setting his prices and making a contract for those, he changed everything. Prices were set individually after that.

***QUESTION:** So before Rod Strong you could not determine the market price of grapes, it was determined by big wine business?*

Helen: Yes, that's right. Rod Strong opened the spigot but other people were doing the same thing by that time, too. We were intimately connected with Peter Friedman who was his original partner. I asked Peter one time what happened to their business, because they lost the winery. And, he said that the banks just poured money over their heads, and they didn't have sense enough not to take it. And, they went and bought many thousands acres of vineyards because they had all this money.

Charles: And then the wine market went into a slump.

Helen: Yes, this is a cyclical business and they couldn't make the payments on their loans and stuff and so they lost the vineyards and the winery.

***QUESTION:** What year was that? In the 60s?*

Charles: More like the 70s.

Helen: After they lost that, Peter Friedman came to us because we had been selling our grapes to them and, when they went under, we couldn't sell them there so we sold them elsewhere. And so, we sold to Chateau St. Jean for two years, and they put our name on the label, and Rod Strong had put our name on the label when they were running it, so Peter Friedman knew we had a good reputation for our grapes. And so, he came to us, and he said to us, "Why don't we go into the wine business?" And we thought, well, that is kind of an interesting proposal, so he and his wife and Charles and I formed an 'S' corporation and went into the wine business. It was Peter's idea to feature the vineyard on the label, and we thought it was going to go good, and he came up with this idea of famous vineyards having their own label, and the winery would be very obscure on the label. He had Fritz Maytag's vineyard featured and Robert Young's. There was Winery Lake, he's still alive, Rene De Rosa, and he had our

vineyard for our Pinot and Chardonnay. Then, Peter got connected with William Hambrecht.

By this time we had bought the Bloom place (another ranch acreage), so when Peter said let's go into the wine business, I said we've got a pretty good building, we could turn it into our aging cellar. So, we spent \$50,000 fixing up that building. It had been a milking parlor.

Charles: The floors were all cement.

Helen: The first wine we made was a '79 Chardonnay and Pinot Noir we made over at Rodney Strong's place. I forget who owned it by then. Somebody had bought it by then, I think they went through two or three owners. But, then it was aged in our cellar, and we had the labels made. By this time Peter had contacted Hambrecht and wanted to build a winery with him, so they built. I wanted to buy this property here below us, and Charles said no we can't buy that, so I told them about it. So, they bought that property for \$100,000 and put the winery there. And so, then what happened, Peter and his wife Caroline, without telling us, sold their half of our company. It was called Healdsburg Winegrowers Inc.—it

was an 'S' corporation—and he sold his half to William Hambrecht. He advertises on PBS every night now. Then we were in business with William Hambrecht, whom we didn't even know. And, so that was Belvedere Winery, and that lasted about 10 years, and then it had to come to an end. So, that's where we are now.

And, then what happened starting in 1973 was the Chateau Montelena thing. (Mrs. Bacigalupi is referring to what is known as the stunning moment in American wine history, the Judgment of Paris of 1976, when French judges determined in a blind tasting of French and California wines, that the California wines they had just tasted, including one made from Bacigalupi grapes, had beat out the French wines.)

QUESTION: *Tell us how that happened?*

Helen: The winemaker, Grgich, called me up and said he wanted to buy some Chardonnay, and he offered a fairly decent price and so we wrote up a contract . . . I guess we had a written contract, I'm not sure about that.

QUESTION: Was that unusual in those days for Sonoma grapes to be a part of Napa wines?

Helen: I don't think it was that unusual. Only, not as much as it is now. Back then, I think we were selling about half of our grapes into Napa. The Dicks were also selling grapes to Grgich, in the same year as we did, too. When we sold our grapes to Grgich I had gone over to Napa around 5 o'clock, I pulled them over in a Volkswagen pick-up. I don't

loading sales receipt for the grapes from Grgich, but not a certified weight tag.

Helen: It's more prevalent now than it was in those days because Napa County is so limited in how much grapes it can grow. Today, I'm selling quite a lot of our grapes to winemakers in Napa Valley. I'm selling Zinfandel, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Petite Sirah. I'm selling all four of our varieties over there. It's amazing. I hate to sell into Napa County, but I have to. I have to sell wherever I can get the best price. And, of course, they don't have much Zinfandel in Napa County. They really made a huge mistake. They went whole hog on Cabernet Sauvignon. Well, some of those wineries make only one wine and try to charge \$100 for it, you know. Some of them are getting into serious trouble over that. So, now they are starting to branch out a little bit and starting to make something else besides the Cab. They've found out that's not going to fly.

<p style="text-align: center;">Chateau Montelena 1429 TUBBS LANE - P. O. BOX 738 CALISTOGA, CALIFORNIA 94515 PHONE (707) 942-6466</p>	
1973 Vintage	Charles Bacigalupi
Pinot Chardonnay	
2.375 x 22.5	= 54.565
2.400 x 22.5	= 54.000
1.400 x 22.5	= 31.500
2.200 x 22.5	= 49.500
2.400 x 22.5	= 54.000
2.250 x 22.5	= 50.625
14.165	320.790 + 14.165 = 25.2 average bailing
14.165 tons x \$815.00	x 122.45% = 314,120.44
Transportation	
14.165 tons x \$15.00/ton	= 212.48
	314,332.92

Loading Sales Receipt from Chateau Montelena for Chardonnay

know how many trips I made, maybe five. They did not have a scale, and I wanted to weigh them, so I scurried all around Napa to find a scale to weigh them, and I eventually did. That's why we have a

Charles: Well, they found out Napa's a good place for Cabernet.

Helen: Yes, it is but they're finding out there was too much of it. They need to diversify now.

QUESTION: *How did Mike Grgich hear about you?*

Helen: I have no idea. He might have seen some of the vineyard designate labels on wine made from our grapes. For instance, Chateau St. Jean. I christened that winery. I was the first load to go into there. Or, it could have been Rodney Strong's Sonoma Winery. By this time, we had won some of the gold awards, I think. You know I have no idea really how he heard of us. You know, we never talked to him very much. Even I remember after the "Judgment" we were over in Napa County at a function there, and I saw him on the street, and I said to him, "Mike, how are things going?" This was after he had started Grgich Hills. Hills came to Grgich—Hills are the coffee people you know—and they had vineyards in Napa County, so they came to Mike after he got this big award and everybody thought he was brilliant and so they said, "Well, we'll use our grapes and you be the winemaker, and we'll build a

winery," and they went into business together.

QUESTION: *But Mike was the winemaker at Chateau Montelena when his wine won at "Judgment" right?*

Helen: Yes, that's the only year he worked there, and we never ever met Barrett (owner of Chateau Montelena).

QUESTION: *So back in the day, Mike Grgich would just go out and buy grapes on behalf of Montelena?*

Helen: Yes, that's very customary.

Charles: Probably, yes, that's how it happened.

Helen: Yes, the winemaker will come and buy the grapes. Yes, it's very customary. Often, you don't even meet the owner. That's often the case. You know who they are, and hopefully they sign the check, but generally you are working with the winemaker.

QUESTION: *So now I am told it's often the practice that a winemaker will visit a vineyard where he is buying grapes all*

year, advising how much water he wants on the grapes, etc.?

Helen: No, no, not for us. No, I do not let somebody run the vineyard. No way.

QUESTION: *So Mike Grgich never came visiting and said you know what, I'd like . . . ?*

Helen: Oh, no, he didn't know anything about growing grapes, I don't think. He knew if they tasted right because he said, "Boy, these are the most beautiful grapes I ever saw in my life." But, other than that he never told us how to grow the grapes. As a matter of fact, I get insulted when someone comes in and tells us how they'd like the grapes grown. Some of them have never grown a grape in their life. Why would they be telling you how to grow a grape? (*Laughing*).

QUESTION: *I was talking to a grape grower the other day, and he said one winemaker came and told him exactly how to grow the grapes he was going to buy, and he just followed those instructions?*

Helen: Well, that's ridiculous. Because they can cause you to lose your crop if they have that much control.

Charles: And, it isn't their crop so they don't have the same commitment to it.

Helen: They don't care. They're not at risk. You are. It's crazy. That's really nuts. There are winemakers that will tell you things they prefer. We don't mind if they want to make a suggestion, but if it doesn't make sense, we are not going to go there.

QUESTION: *So back to Mike Grgich, he would just call you at the beginning of the year to buy grapes?*

Helen: I only sold to him once in the whole time, for the wine that eventually went to Paris. See, the next year, he went with Hills and did his own thing with them. They grew their own grapes, so Grgich could not buy ours.

QUESTION: *That's an amazing result—a win in Paris—from just a one-time buy?*

Helen: Yes, it is. But, of course it was great. He's a millionaire now. It made a

millionaire of him. And, of course the Napa people didn't want anyone to know that the Chardonnay for it came from Sonoma County. Afterwards, I said to Mike, "How are things going?" And, he said, "I'm not getting any good grapes," and he was crabbing. Well, you know, in some parts of Napa County, it's too hot to grow Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Charles: Yes, well, that's why they grow Cabs.

Helen: Unless they go down to Carneros, and Carneros is too cold, if you ask me!
(*Laughing*)

QUESTION: *So when you started some of your clients were soon some of the best winemakers there are? Who have you sold to?*

Helen: About the time we broke up with Belvedere, one of them, and I think it was Selyem, because they knew Belvedere weren't going to buy any more grapes from us, and so the Belvedere winemaker at Selyem, when he was looking for grapes, told Selyem about us, and so Selyem came right here into this kitchen, and he said, "You tell me your price. I

won't negotiate with you. But, if I don't like it, you won't hear from me again." He didn't like my price, so I never heard from him again. But, then when John Dyson bought Williams Selyem, Bob Cabral was the winemaker there, and he wanted to buy my grapes, and that was great.

Charles: We have been selling to wineries wherever Bob was. Wherever he has been, we have sold to those wineries. What did I tell you, it's the winemaker who buys the grapes. He worked for Alderbrook, and we sold grapes there. Then he went to Kendall-Jackson, and then to one of the wineries down the river, and we sold to them while he was there, and then he went to Williams Selyem. We're still selling to them. They do a vineyard designate Zinfandel out of one block. And, then they have a block of Pinot they take from us, but they're not doing a vineyard designate on that. So, we work with them. We have also sold to Foppiano and Seghesio, Graton Ridge, Fantesca, Pezzi King Vineyards, Rudd, Tudal, John Tyler, Arista, Gott, D'Argenzio, Armida, Venge, Peter Paul, Gracianna.

QUESTION: *How did your grapes get to be so highly esteemed? What do you know about grapes or the land that have made that happen?*

Helen: We didn't know a fool thing about grapes when we started, and that's the God's truth. You know, we were both professional people, and we didn't know anything about farming. Even Charles' mother, who was born out on Chiquita Road (west of Healdsburg), didn't like farming. I don't know why, because her father was a farmer, yet she was so unhappy when we bought this place. But, she grew to love the place. But, she really didn't want us to be farmers, (*Laughing*) which is kind of crazy.

QUESTION: *So she didn't help you grow great grapes?*

Helen: No, she knew nothing about that. She wasn't interested in that, at all. Nothing.

QUESTION: *Did you go get advice at the beginning, or was it trial and error?*

Charles: Well, we mentioned Bob Sisson of UC Davis Extension. He was a patient

of mine and, of course, every time he came in the office, we talked. And, we got other help.

Helen: Yes, when we bought the place there were a couple of old Italian guys that lived in town, and they loved to prune vines, and every winter they would come and prune our Zinfandels out here and whatever else we had, so they knew what they were doing. We didn't know what we were doing, but they knew what they were doing.

Charles: I did the discing. I could drive a tractor, naturally.

Helen: They were wonderful because we didn't know anything about pruning. But, they'd been doing it for years. When we started—the Israeli's actually developed drip irrigation—but there was no irrigation then, especially up here in the hills. When we bought the Frost place (Helen shows a map of a rectangular piece of property sitting along Westside Road which has Russian River frontage), we got water rights to the Russian River. This property actually used to go over across the river, and then the river moved, and they cut a piece off and mined it for

gravel, so it's not a piece of this property now. But, we still have water rights from the river. But, the previous owners had been irrigating the property with aluminum pipe that they moved in each year and took it out so they could disc. We put it under drip. Everything we have now is under drip. But, when we bought this ranch, there was no irrigation here, and I remember that we put Pinot Noir back here, and one year I called up Rod Strong and was telling him, look the grapes are 23 (brix) but they are dropping their leaves and he said, 'Well, bring them in, they'll not get any more sugar if the leaves are dropping. They're finished, bring 'em in.' (*Laughing*) Today growers bring them to 24 and 25. So, we thought that we better get some water, so we built this lake back here about 1964, I think.

QUESTION: *What year did you start irrigating?*

Helen: I would say it was probably about 1970 or so.

Charles: Yes, about then.

Helen: Sometimes I have people call me up, and they want to buy non-irrigated grapes now, and I say, "Look, we can get them to 25 if that's what you want, but they will just be dehydrated to get there." They cannot ripen themselves, at least not up on this bench land, without irrigation. They won't, they'll drop their leaves, and then the only way you'll get to 25 is for the grapes to dehydrate. And, so this myth about dry-farmed fruit as being superior is total baloney. You can get it to 25 if you want to make it into half a raisin, but that's not necessarily where the quality is. It's a myth. I have a scientific background, so I can't tolerate this baloney. I know where the truth is, and that's where we have to go.

(Charles opens up a bottle of Napa's Rudd Winery Chardonnay with Bacigalupi Vineyard designate so we can taste a splendid wine made from Bacigalupi grapes.)

Charles: This is made 100 per cent from the vines that went to Paris. Not only is our name on the label, but they even put Bacigalupi on the foil. We've never seen that before. We didn't even know people did that.

Helen: Yes, this wine is from our Block 3. And, one thing I didn't tell you about is that before we went into business with Peter Friedman and all that, I said to Charles, "We have to trademark our name," because people were already starting to put it on their labels. So, I said we have to get control of this because if someone puts out some lousy wine with our name on it, it's really going to hurt us, so we have an agreement with everybody that the use of our name will not entitle them to use it as a brand name, but there would be some debate about whether it always works like that.

QUESTION: *What is the story of this wine?*

Helen: Rudd owns Oakville Grocery in Healdsburg and Napa, and he also owns Dean & DeLuca, that's his firm.

Charles: I have had some very nice visits with him over the years.

Helen: (Helen then shows a small map that charts all the different blocks of grapes on the ranch). If they want to know when the grapes are planted, it shows

that, how many acres are planted. (She points out the oldest block they have.) This was planted in 1965. It's actually the Wentz clone.

QUESTION: *If you had to share your experiences of growing fine grapes what would you highlight as important to the next generation?*

Helen: The soil. We knew nothing about soil when we started, believe me. Nothing. Except that it was dirt. And, this is not alluvial soil on these benches, alluvial is down near the river. It's good soil, but what we have on our benches is better.

Charles: Better for grapes.

Helen: I think the superior quality of this soil in my view is that this soil, if you dig down a little bit it's red. It's oxidized iron, because it's the original soil from the volcanoes that were here. And, I think it gives grapes a flavor. There must be some reason they are superior to other grapes, that's all I can think of.

Charles: Plus the clones.

Helen: And, the cultivation that goes into it. But, probably the location, too. We're at the north end of the Russian River Valley which is really terrific because it's just an ideal climate. We're early, but yet we are cool.

Charles: Yes, the fog comes in. It comes up the river.

Helen: It comes, but our normal day here in the summertime is to run down to 50 degrees at night and then back up to 85 degrees in the afternoon. That's ideal, absolutely ideal. You get a 40 degree temperature change in 24 hours. And, that's what keeps the acid high.

My mother came from Hungary, so I always tell Charles, the Italians didn't start the wine business, the Hungarians did. You know, many places don't have the climate we do. We've traveled to South America and to Portugal and Spain, and when you come home, you think, my God, we live in heaven with what they are putting up with there. There the bureaucrats run everything. We would ask, "Why are you doing that?" And they would say, "Well, we are required to do that." And I would think, oh geez.

Charles: They're told how many buds to leave on a spur. How many canes to leave on a vine. This is in Spain, I am talking about. And Portugal, too.

Helen: There we saw their vines. They were little, only about this high (Helen points to her ankles). They were pruning them while we were there, and each spur had a couple of buds and were just a little bit off the ground planted in rocks as big as a loaf of bread. You couldn't see any soil, just rocks. And, they weren't allowed to irrigate. Forbidden to irrigate! There was one little block about the size of our kitchen where they had the grapes growing higher than the others, maybe to about two feet high, and they were drip irrigating them. I asked them what they were doing, and they said they were trying out drip irrigation to see if it would work. I laughed and said we've been doing this for 20-25 years now. Then finally I said, "Who does your work," because you know to prune those vines you'd have had to go along on your knees. And, to pick the grapes, too. And, the owner said, "We go over to Morocco to get our workers each day, and then we carry them back at night." Why make it

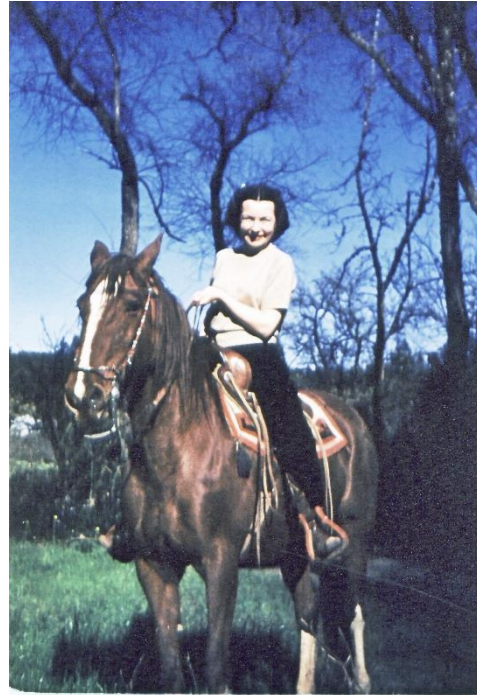
so difficult, I wondered? We believe it's better to bring the vines up to your waist and shoulders where you can work on the vine at a normal height. And, I read some place after we decided to do that, as it makes it so much easier on the pickers and everyone else because they can run under the canes. And, also I read it's good to have a big long trunk because that stores carbohydrates in the vine all winter long. And, they are then more resistant to freezing then, too. And, also the closer they are to the ground, the more apt they are to freeze.

QUESTION: *When you began to grow grapes what was your goal: to grow the best grapes?*

To make a living from grapes?

Helen: Oh, I think it was just accidental. I'm always amused about people having plans. Nobody planned anything here.

Charles: I was a dentist—that was my business. I was busy. We really bought the ranch because we wanted to live in the country and have a ranch. And, it happened to have about twenty acres of



Helen on Peggy

grapes. The prunes had pretty much been let go.

They were still harvesting them, but they weren't working the ground. When we bought this land, all the valley was in prunes. When we got out of school in 1951, Dry Creek and Alexander Valley, this whole area was prunes. In the spring when you looked from up here over the valley or went to other valleys, you saw nothing but prune blossoms. The ladies of Alexander Valley used to give a special lunch at prune blossom time, and buses used to come up from San Francisco and people paid to come in the bus, go for a prune blossom tour of Alexander Valley and then go to the Alexander Valley

community hall, and they would have lunch there that the ladies of the valley prepared.

Helen: We have a postcard that shows a picture of the Healdsburg area, and it looks like it's covered in snow, but it's prune blossoms. Beautiful.

Charles: All the grapes were in the hills. Well, the bottom land was too valuable to use for grape growing.

Helen: Originally, when people here were dependent on horses and there were big cattle ranches, they had to grow feed for the horses and cattle, and so, of course, they worked the ground with horses, so the good ground for growing their feed was down by the river where it's flat. They never put grapes down there.

Helen: It was all horses here. In fact, Charles' mother, after the 1906 earthquake, said the family got into a horse and buggy and came up to Healdsburg. Charles' grandfather had a big vineyard just outside Healdsburg.

QUESTION: *How did you learn how to grow grapes?*

Helen: We have, of course, educated ourselves. But you never know it all in this business. We are, in fact, still learning. But, we belong to the American Society of Enology and Viticulture, and we have taken their bulletins for about 50 years. And, I've taken courses over at Davis. So has Charles. A five-day course. There's new knowledge all the time coming out. Now we're fighting all these diseases, and we have to learn all about that. Somebody brought some cuttings over in a suitcase, I guess, to Napa County and spread the European grapevine moth around. And boy, we had to jump through all kinds of hoops this year because they don't want to spread it all over the state. And, they had to quarantine all Napa County. We shipped some grapes to New York this year, and we had to go through all kinds of rigmarole because of that. We've been selling, this is the third year now, to an entity that calls itself City Winery, and they actually crush the grapes right in downtown New York. So, it's kind of interesting what they are doing.

QUESTION: *How do you think they heard about you?*

Helen: Oh, I guess you might say, through the grapevine. (*Laughing*). I don't know if it's going to fly or not. This year was a very difficult year because of the weather, and they had contracted to buy four tons of Petite Sirah, and we had to fight disease like crazy this year because it was foggy just about the whole day. You didn't get sun till three o'clock. So, the winemaker finally said, we can't take the Petite Sirah because we don't think by the time it's shipped to New York that it will make good wine. That made it more risky for us. But, it's an interesting concept.

Charles: The problem with that is that we have to put the grapes into little picking boxes and haul them around on pallets, and you have to shrink wrap 'em, otherwise they'll spill. But, it's kind of a pain in the neck. And, then they send a refrigerated truck over, and we load it in the truck, and they take them to Lodi because they are buying grapes somewhere else, as well, and they fill a big truck with all of them and ship them all together across the country.

QUESTION: *Do you see lots of people take many approaches—of which that is one—to survive through difficult markets?*

Helen: There is so much change. We have seen enormous change in the fifty years we've been doing it.

QUESTION: *What changes have you seen in the industry in the 50 years you've been in it?*

Helen: What we've seen so much of is consolidation. I mean, little guys start out, and this is still going on... they start out sometimes almost in their garage, and it is pretty easy to get into the wine business. And, once they've developed a reputation, they get bought out and then more of them come in and it continuously goes on and on. New people keep coming into the business.

QUESTION: *But do people not stick with it? Stay long-term?*

Helen: Oh, yes, many do. Us. For instance, once we went to a party they gave, and I said to Charles, "I want to sit

near Hambrecht,” who had become our partner in Healdsburg Winegrowers Inc. because I didn’t know what the guy was about. So, I sat across the table from him and during the dinner he said, “Would you be interested in selling your ranch?”—and I said, “No, when I came here I said I’m going out of here in a pine box, and it’s still the way it is. “

One thing that has changed for the worse in the wine industry is the bureaucracy. Right now, they are harassing us to not use water out of the Russian River for frost protection. I don’t know what’s going to happen there. I don’t think we actually use any water out of the Russian River for frost protection. We do use it for irrigation. But, they are still talking about limits. The thing is we have water rights on all of our water. And, California’s water rights are probably some of the strongest in the nation, because as you know, California’s a desert. If it weren’t for the Sierras, this place would be a desert.

QUESTION: *What are the changes you have seen in marketing and consumers taste in your fifty years?*

Helen: Changing consumer tastes is always a challenge. And, changing out your varieties of grapes under those circumstances is risky because consumers’ tastes might change right back again. We got in a bit of a jam ourselves because of a little block originally we planted to Johannisberg Riesling.

Charles: It was Mike Grgich who told us to do it.

Helen: Not many people had it in those days, because it is a tough grape to grow. And, nobody wanted it, and so I remember taking it out. We had trouble selling it, and it mildews at the drop of a hat, so we said, “Why don’t we plant something else?” So, we pulled it out and planted Cabernet there. But, we’ve been so successful at promoting this area as a cool river area here that nobody thought you could grow a decent Cabernet here. But, you can, and it was delicious. But, I couldn’t sell it, so I said “OK, it’s coming out, too.”

Charles: We sold it for a while when there was a shortage of Cab. And, then

Napa got a big glut of Cab over there, so you couldn't sell it.

Helen: So, then we chopped off the Cab and grafted on Chardonnay.

Charles: We got beautiful vines but it was full of leaf-roll.

Helen: Somehow it didn't marry good. So, we're in the process of pulling it. I don't know what we are going to put there. But, you can get trapped. This is a very cyclical business, and certain varieties go in and out. And, now there's also a glut of Merlot. People went head over heels for Merlot and Syrah, but it's a glut now. I never did see Merlot for anything. I think Merlot sold because it was an easy thing to say! (*Laughing*) And then that movie, *Sideways*, came out and then it shot that down. However, luckily for us, you can't grow Pinot Noir everywhere, and that's a blessing. You can't grow Chardonnay everywhere either, so we've got the hotspot here for that, too. Someone wrote the other day that Westside Road is the Rodeo Drive of Pinot Noir. I thought that was funny!

QUESTION: *How do you stay up with technical changes in the vineyard? Trellising, things like that?*

Helen: We've never paid too much attention to what other people are doing. We do our own thing. In fact, when we first planted that first block, the block that went to Paris, we trained our canes to run out above each other about 18 inches apart. The university at Davis said it would never work. The top cane will shade out the bottom cane and you'll never have any grapes out there. Well, it wasn't true. It's still that way.

Charles: In fact, the university was saying if you are going to put four canes out, which was what was normal, to put two canes on one wire.

Helen: Yes, you had to have four canes, but they were all on the same wire. That was dumb. I don't know why they told people to do that. We just rationalized and said they are going to be all bunched up there together, and they are going to be full of rot.

Charles: A friend of ours who is a vineyard manager for someone in

Alexander Valley and a graduate of Davis, that's what he was doing.

Helen: Yes, he believed them.

Charles: They told him that at the school, and he came out and did it, and he got a lot of rot. Paul Heck (of Korbel fame) was a patient of mine, and he agreed with me to take two out in one direction one above the other and two out in the other direction the same way. And, it worked fine. Otherwise, the grapes, when the bunches started to develop, they were all tangled up and matting together, and it was just a mess and to cut them and prune them and get them off the wire was a real fight. And, people just finally quit doing it.

Helen: Now the new style is what they call VSP—it stands for Vertical Shoot Positioning. They put one wire, people put them different distances from the ground, but basically whatever the height is, they put the cordons out on one wire, and then they go straight up and go through a thing so it's like a hedge, and a lot of producers have been doing it. We saw some done like that this summer when it was so cold, and they were trying

to expose the fruit to the sun to get some heat on them, and I said, "Boy, that guy's taking a chance." And, a little later on we had three days of over 100 degree heat, and it just fried them, of course. The wineries will not accept burnt fruit. A lot of people lost their fruit. We never ever went in for that, because all it had to do was to have one bunch hanging out from someplace, and it's going to get the full sun, and then it's burnt. So, we have trained our vines to put them on the wire, but then we separate it so that there are two wires, and then they go up, and we have a moveable wire so they will make an umbrella, and you get a lot of air underneath the umbrella, but you never get full sun on the grapes. You get transitory sun. And, the west and the south side are pretty well shaded, so they don't get the full sun.

Charles: Actually, it was our son John who developed our trellis system.

Helen: It's kind of an expensive trellis system, but you do get the aeration, and you get the filtered sun, and you don't have the burn problem.

Charles: And, it occurred to me about putting both canes on one vine, this is cane pruning, not cordon pruning, which a lot of people did when we started, and I think they still do. Davis was recommending cane pruning for Cabernet, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and what else I don't know, but from what I see now, most people are cordoning everything. In fact, we started to do that, and we found we were losing shoot positions on the cordons. It's okay for Zin and Petite Sirah, but the Pinot and Chardonnay and the Cab, when we had it, it's not for them. So, we've gone back to the cane pruning, and John has developed a really nice trellis system for canes, rather than the 'California sprawl' as it is talked about all the time. We have an 18-24 inch T at the top, and every other stake is taller than the general stakes, and the tall stake has a T on it. We only have one pair of moving wire, whereas most of these systems have two moving, that is two pairs. We just have the one pair, and when the vines are out enough, we put them up, and that directs the shoots to the inside of the T where the wire is stationary and the canes form an umbrella-like structure.

Helen: We don't hedge usually, but we hedge if the canes come down too far. If you look at some vineyards, like in France, they are just solid hedge. But, I can't see hedging at all. As soon as you cut the tip of a cane off, it starts throwing laterals, you know, and this clogs everything up, and if air can't get through when it's such dense foliage... You really don't want that. You want it more open. The leaves to be there, but more open so the air goes in. Another great thing about our system of trellising is, and I discovered this quite accidentally, was that we had a little block of old vines up here, head-pruned. We had one row coming down here on a wire, and the starlings came down here one year, and they wiped that whole thing out because they could see the grapes so well, and they ate the whole thing. This row close to that canopy, they didn't go near them. And I hadn't thought of it before, but the birds do not like to come in under that umbrella for some reason.

QUESTION: *How did you hear about your big wine at the Judgment of Paris, and what did you do when you heard about it?*

Helen: Charles and John, our son, were up in Canada sailing, circumnavigating Vancouver Island, and I thought well, the year before we'd had rain in July, and thought I'd rather stay at the vineyard. Anyway, they were gone, but I had decided to stay home on the 4th of July 1976. I remember it so well. It was our country's 200th anniversary, and I thought I should do something for myself to celebrate. So, I was making myself a cake. Then the phone rang, and it was Mike Grgich. He said, "Have you heard about the award," and I said, "No, what are you talking about?" And, he said our wine just won an award ahead of all the French Chardonnays and he said, "I'll send you the article out of Time magazine," and then he said, "I'd like to buy some Chardonnay." And, I said, "I'm sorry Mike, I have already sold it all, so there won't be any for you." So, anyway, he sent me the story, so that's how I heard about it.

On May 24, 1976 in Paris, France, one of the most prestigious and formidable group of wine tasters in the world held a blind tasting of Chardonnay-White Burgundy style wines.

OFFICIAL RESULTS

Vintage	Wine	Place	Total points	No. of first place votes
1973	Chateau Montelena, Bacigalupi Chardonnay, Sonoma County	1st	132	6
1973	Messelt Charnes (Roulot, prop)	2nd	126.5	0
1974	Chateau Vineyards	3rd	121	3
1973	Spring Mountain	4th	104	0
1973	Beaune-Clos des Mouches (Drouhin)	5th	101	0
1972	Freeman's Abbey	6th	100	0
1973	Salard-Montrachet (Ramon-Prudhon)	7th	94	0
1972	Puligny-Montrachet le cru "Les Pucelles" (Domaine Lefevre, Prop)	8th	89	0
1972	Veddercrest	9th	88	0
1973	David Bruce	10th	42	0

THE TASTING PANEL

These were the tasters and their scores* for Chateau Montelena.

Place	Points	Taster
4th	10	Mr. Pierre Breux - Inspector General, Institute National Des Appellations D'Origine
1st	18	Mr. Aubert De Villaine - Co-Gérant, Domaine De La Romanée - Conti
1st	18.5	Mr. Christian Vancoupe - Chef Sommelier, "Le Tour D'Argent"
1st	18.5	Mr. Claude Dubois - Maître - Directeur Commercial "Le Nouveau Guide"
1st	18.5	Mrs. Chetka Kahn - Directrice, House De Vie De France
1st	17	Mr. Raymond Oliver - "Le Grand Veneur"
2nd	14	Mr. Pierre Tari - Chateau Giscours, Secrétaire General, Syndicat Des Grand Cru Classés
1st	17	Mr. Jean-Claude Vrinat - "Tallieres"
7th	3	Mr. Michel Dovez - Institute Oenologique De France

*Scoring was based on 20 point maximum

Judgment of Paris—Winners/Judges

QUESTION: So he hadn't been in Paris?

Helen: Oh, no. No, he didn't have anything to do with the competition. I like the way the French were so cocksure about winning it. The funny thing is they agreed to do it again, and they lost again!

QUESTION: Did you realize how important that '73 wine made from your grapes was at the time?

Helen: It was really important for Grgich. The next spring after, Grgich bought the grapes which would have been '74, some

two years before the Judgment of Paris. Probably around March, I got a letter from Chateau Montelena saying they would not be interested in our grapes any more, because they were going to get Napa grapes instead of Sonoma County grapes. That was nice that they let me know. And, then after the award, Grgich said to me, "You know I have to make my reputation the first time out of the shoot." And, I wanted to say to him, "I have to make mine every year." (*Laughing*)

QUESTION: *So, after he took the '73 grapes, you really didn't hear anything else from Grgich?*

Helen: No. Well, I just got that letter from Chateau Montelena in '74 saying they weren't going to buy any more grapes. That was two years before the great tasting.

QUESTION: *So you didn't know what was happening to that wine till you got the call from Grgich about the win in '76?*

Helen: No. It was a kind of shocking call. I mean, it really put California on the map. Before that, everything was France, France, France. When the Wall Street

Journal changed its wine writer recently (by the way, the previous writers loved our wine), he just started to write about French wines all the time, and then I met someone from the Sonoma County Grape Commission at a Williams Selyem event, and I told him to get his marketing person to find out what the WSJ was up to, especially since California wines have beat French wines twice in a row. I don't know if he did or not. But, funnily the next week, they actually had an article on California wines, but they haven't had once since, I don't think.

QUESTION: *When did you first think you would like to grow grapes?*

Helen: Oh, we never thought about that.

Charles: No, we never thought we'd like to grow grapes. They were just here when we bought the ranch.

Helen: Nobody was making money from growing grapes in those days, so we didn't even think about it. Though 30 years later, Perry Beeson, after he'd seen some of these headlines where we made the front page of the paper for our awards said, "You know Charlie, we were all

laughing behind your back when you bought that ranch out there. We thought you were crazy.” He told us that thirty years later. (*Laughing*).

QUESTION: *So, it was just chance?*

Helen: Yes, absolute chance. We didn’t think about grapes. They were just here. But, of course, we took care of the crops that were here. We harvested the cherries. We hauled those to Sebastopol for about three or four years.

Charles: And, they made maraschino cherries with them there.

Helen: So, we sold the fruit and the grapes that were here. We tried to make whatever money we could off of the place. We didn’t make too much money off of the place. I worked for five years



Helen in Meese’s Pharmacy—1952

after we moved to Healdsburg. I was working then at Meese’s Pharmacy, right on West Street in Healdsburg, it was called in those days, near where the Healdsburg Hotel is today. That pharmacy was old. In those days you could buy poisons: strychnine, arsenic, you name it. All you had to do was sign the poison register. You couldn’t do that today. You could not buy strychnine today, I don’t think. I never worked as a pharmacist after we bought the Goddard Ranch.

Charles: My folks used to get strychnine to kill things like gophers with.

QUESTION: *I forgot to confirm with you, were the grapes that went to the Judgment of Paris wine irrigated?*

Helen: Yes.

Charles: Yes, but back to the field blends. We did have some Golden Chasselas we picked separately from the other grapes, and those were sold for whites. But, some of the other Golden Chasselas were mixed up with the red, and we put all that together.

QUESTION: *What kind of wine does Golden Chasselas make? Good?*

Charles: I don't think so.

Helen: No, I don't think so either. That's why you never hear of it any more. It looks kind of like a Thompson Seedless. Not very much flavor to it. I think nobody uses it any more.

Charles: I think in the valley they still grow a lot of them, as it still produces. And, French Colombard is another one. There used to be a lot of it here.

Helen: Such a history, but we've got a long way to go before we become a wine-drinking country, let me tell you.

Charles: If people who live in 'fly-over' country would drink wine, there wouldn't be enough to go around.

Helen: There's still a long way for the wine industry to grow.

Charles: Wine is part of life here in Sonoma County now, but it wasn't always this way. When I was growing up, even when we bought this ranch, grapes

were worth almost nothing. Well, here's a story to illustrate the importance of it as a crop. We finally ended selling grapes to Foppiano, because they were often still working with their prunes when our grapes were ready to pick. And, I can remember going over there and talking to Louis and saying, "Hey, my grapes are ready, it's time to get them off." And, he'd be dipping prunes, and he'd say "You know, I'm sorry, I just I can't do it. I can't take them now till I'm through with my prunes." Prunes were the important crop, even to a winery, back then. Grapes weren't that important. It would have been around 1956, '57, '58, '59. So, we sold those grapes elsewhere, we had to. It didn't matter to us where we sold our grapes then, Seghesio had been after us, too, but since the price didn't vary, it didn't matter where we sold.



Charles & John disking old Zin—1963

QUESTION: *When you had, back in those days, grapes like Colombard and Sauvignon Vert, was it a difficult decision*

to make when you had to pull some of them out?

Helen: Oh, no, you don't waste any time on pulling it out, let me tell you.

Charles: We saw there was no demand for them pretty quickly.

Helen: And, it would be fine for big outfits to buy those grapes as they put them into 50,000 gallon tanks, and they all get mixed in together. That's why we don't sell to those big outfits, because we put a great deal of hand-labor into our grapes, and we can't afford to sell them to people who are going to throw them into a 50,000 gallon tank. I mean, it just won't work. We sell to people who are keeping the grapes separate and who are making top quality wine. That's the only way we can make it, we can't make it otherwise. Not financially.

QUESTION: *So, when do you make your deals for the grapes? In spring?*

Helen: Yes, I start around about March. I advertise, and this was a tough year to sell grapes. It was really tough. The big guys weren't in the game this year, as far as we

were concerned. I think it was economics. I think they might not have been able to borrow the money, or . . . but, I really can't say. The wine market is soft, we know that. So, the reason I sold all the crop this year, pretty much, is because I sell to many people, some very teeny, some of them are garage operations. But generally, they pay and they pay right on time, which is more than some of the big ones do. Some big operators pay half in October and the other half December 31, and a lot of time I don't get it until the next year. And, we're cash finances and so if I get it before December 31, and it depends on what day the last day of the year is, and if I get it late and can't get it to the bank . . . that's difficult. Tax-wise, it's supposed to be 'available' to me by that date, even if the bank is closed over the last day or days of the month, I need to have it in hand. It's really tricky the way the law is written on that.

QUESTION: *What makes the life of a grape grower difficult—how do factors stack up? Is it weather, followed by customers . . . or, how does that stack up?*

Helen: It's all part of it. Now, see we're hands-on here, and I think our customers

appreciate that fact because they work directly with us. Now, some of these people who come here and buy property for the house, not for the vineyard, but say they have five acres of vineyard, five acres is not big enough to make it worth buying equipment to manage the vineyard, you really have to have equipment. So, then they go out and hire a contractor to manage the vineyard. Then, the vineyard management man is supposed to go out and sell the grapes. If he doesn't sell the grapes, they are still stuck for paying him. And, I wonder what happens. The other bad thing about that is that a lot of times management companies are saying they are managing 1,000 acres, they have to have a lot of staff and a lot of equipment. If they can't then make the rounds to get to the little guys in time, you are going to have a lot of rot in a lot of places. It depends on whose grapes are going to get taken care of first and whose grapes get taken off last—what happens to their grapes. So, they might lose the whole crop, and then still be stuck for paying the contractor.

QUESTION: *Do you have your own crews?*

Helen: Yes, we have a steady crew of three men, and then if we need a few more if we're getting behind with the pruning or something, then we go out and hire some more, enough to get through that. And then during the harvest, we hire for that, too. We've had the same men for over ten years now. They are all related, and we have a little house on one of our places for them to live in so they don't have to spend a lot of money commuting, etc. We have work for them year round.

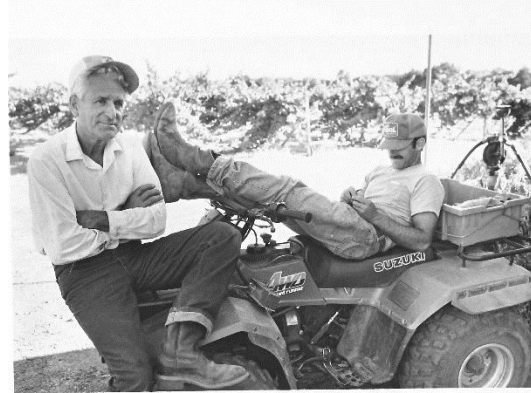
Charles: Yes, year round.



John Bacigalupi
ANA Graduation—1974

Helen: John, our son, manages them. That takes a fair amount of time. We weren't as big, before John when I did it, but since he was in his early twenties he's worked along with us. We sent him away to military academy for his high school, and he got an excellent education and his grandmother told him you'll never amount to anything if you don't go to college. But, I was told that he was the most homesick boy they had ever had in the school down there. And, so I could see he was getting depressed every time Charles' mother would make a crack about going to college. He didn't want to leave home again. And, so I told her, "You know, I want you to leave him alone. He's old enough to make decisions for himself, and if he doesn't want to go off to college, then it's perfectly all right. He has a pretty good education right now, and I'm sure he will get by fine without any further education." He's a great reader, he educates himself continually still. So, she left off him. And of course, he's going to inherit this whole thing. It's his whole life. I'm sure he loves it.

Charles: Yes, he likes it.



Charles & John—1987

QUESTION: *From your family, Charles, did you gain any experience with grapes?*

Charles: I used to work on my aunt and uncle's ranch out in Dry Creek when I was a kid. It was part of the land that surrounds the Wilson Winery today. My cousin still owns the same land, William Auradou. I used to stay there with my aunt and uncle, my mother's sister. But back then, grapes, as I said before, grapes were the poor relation around here, when I grew up. As I was saying, you needed to get the prunes out before the grapes, and if you just didn't get them, well, too bad, it was just the way it was. And, that was the attitude because people weren't drinking wine the way they are now. Now, they did have some grapes on the place and the old ranch, which was how they always referred to my grandparents' old place on Chiquita Road, they started

out, I think, with about 80 acres when they moved here from Sonoma in 1883. And, my aunt Clara, who later married Jack Auradou, whose family had a ranch on West Dry Creek, and that's how it got the name Auradou, she was three years old when they moved from Sonoma over here, and then they bought another hundred some odd acres so that they had about 300 acres. My mother was never really sure because no one in the family thought much of that old ranch after they bought the one on Dry Creek because the Dry Creek ranch was mostly on bottom land, and that's where the prunes grew. And, that's where the money was. Whereas the old ranch off Chiquita Road was all in the hills, and they always bad-mouthed it. I can remember my mother and my aunt always bad-mouthing the old ranch. But, of course, it was a great place to grow grapes. Especially since that was all you could grow. When my grandfather died in 1902, my grandmother gave the whole shebang away. She married an old friend whose wife had died, that she and my grandfather had known before who had a ranch down in the Carneros area, Marcucci was his name, apparently a real nice guy. My mother always spoke well of him. Well, my grandmother gave

everything away, and she split the Dry Creek Ranch between my aunt Clara and her brother Ernest Gaddini. And Ernie got the north half which surrounds the Wilson Winery today, and it had the house on it, and Clara got the south half, and they built a house on it which is still there today. My mother got the old ranch because it was practically, by comparison, of no value. It did have a good house on it, though. My mother wasn't married, and gram didn't think she needed as much.

Helen: Yes, it did. It had a good house, didn't it?

Charles: But, the winery had burnt down and the distillery and everything had burnt down, everything but the house, and phylloxera had decimated the vineyards, so when I was growing up my mother had already sold it. In fact, I think she had sold it before she even got married.

Helen: She got \$10,000 for it. In those days, a pretty good price for it.

Charles: Yes, a pretty good price. I remember we used to laugh at this story.

Marcucci knew my Dad before he met my Mom, and he used to tell him, "You ought to marry Ollie, I think she has \$10,000." Anyway, my mother and father met at a dance in Glen Ellen. The building is still there. I can remember when I was a kid, it was very common in small towns for a hotel or some large building to have a dance hall upstairs. And, this hotel had a dance floor. My dad was there with his sister Virginia, and she knew my mother, and that's how they met. At that time my mother was already engaged to marry a relation of the Blocks, who were Auradou's neighbors to the south. And, in fact, I don't know if they still call it Block's Turn, but it's that very sharp turn there as you are coming from town that was called Block's Turn in those days, and the house was built just below it. Anyway, Mom was engaged to marry a relation of the Block's—I think he was a cousin—and she had an engagement ring. She had the whole bit. And, my Dad stopped to see her shortly after they met at the dance. And, as she was walking from the house to greet him, she turned her engagement ring around. And he said, "My heart just jumped when I saw that." He just knew what that meant. And so, she gave up her fiancé and returned his

ring, I think he was called Charles, he lived in San Francisco and had been coming up to see the Blocks and my mother on the weekends.

Helen: Oh, she didn't want to marry a farmer, and that guy would have ended up as a farmer. Cause, as I said, she was so unhappy when we bought this place. She hated farming. And also, I had said to the Goddards when we bought the place from them, "Feel free to come by any time to see the place." Maybe to Gertie Goddard, I said it. And she said, "I never want to see the place again." And I thought, gee, that was odd, but I can see maybe why. I guess they struggled here very hard.

Charles: Well, they went through the Depression.

Helen: It was hard. Everything they had done here was done by hand. Every time I come up our road, I think of them. That they had to make this road by pick and shovel and horses. They didn't have equipment. It must have been a lot of hard work. Especially for the women, washboards and all that.

Charles: They did have water on the back porch, though.

Helen: Yes, because there was a spring there. That was one of the things they showed us when we came to look at the place. But, they had to heat the water on the stove.

Charles: And, they had to pull it up in a bucket.

Helen: But, at least it was handy. It's because of water that this side of Westside Road was never developed, because there was no water up here. In Dry Creek there seemed to be water all along that ridge. There are springs up there, I think. So, Dry Creek was developed a lot more. But, Westside Road that didn't happen here on the upside of the road because there was no way to get water up here. But, this place had the spring which was terrific.

Charles: We have a lot of springs.

Helen: It was the first thing that attracted me to the place. We still get our water from them.

Charles: And our son, John, is getting his water from another spring on this ranch.

Helen: There's a knoll on our ranch where there are springs all around it. So, this place is sitting right on an aquifer. On the north side, across our line up there, there is a huge spring, and it used to feed the house of Dr. McClish, he was a dentist. It was a beautiful house up there, and they let some hippies get in it, and it burnt to the ground just a couple of years ago. He used to get his water from the spring that was just beyond our fence line. So, there are springs clear around this land.

QUESTION: *Your ranch is close to that of the renowned Rochioli family. What has been your history with them?*

Helen: The ranch, at least part of it that the Rochiolis have was the Walter's ranch. Mrs. Fenton was a Walter, and that's the house Joe Rochioli lives in—it belonged to Mrs. Fenton. She married someone who was in the publishing business, a Mr. Fenton from Oregon. He died at an early age, and they split the ranch. She got one piece, and Billy Walter got the other piece. It was a big

ranch. Big Joe Rochioli, that is the senior one, used to help her run her property. To our knowledge, the main crop till the end of World War II was hops. By the time we moved here, though, the place had some grapes, but how many we don't know.

Helen: People in hops made a lot of money. Fast.

Charles: Then the bottom fell out.

Helen: Then after her husband died, Mrs. Fenton had to have somebody to run the ranch, as they never had any children. And, she needed someone to help her. So, she hired Joe Rochioli's father, and he was running the ranch. He was from Italy, and the reason I met him was that I was registering people to vote up and down Westside Road, and I came to him and, in those days if you were a naturalized American, you had to show your papers in order to get registered. I don't think you have to do that any more, but you did in those days. They had to swear they could read and write, in the English language yet. So, that's how I met him. We got to know Joe because when we started our vineyards, we asked Bob

Sissons from UC Davis, "Where are we going to find somebody to graft these vines?" He said, "We've trained Joe Rochioli to graft, and he's the only one around here who knows how to graft grape vines." Joe was pretty young then, but very good.

Charles: Yes, he was.

Helen: And, he grafted our first vineyards. Joe Junior, that is.

Charles: He didn't do it alone of course, he had a couple of friends.

Helen: After Mrs. Fenton's husband died, Joe senior used to run her property for her. See, she had no children, no relatives, nothing, and Joe and his family used to take care of her. I know that his brother got a piece of that property, and Joe also got a piece to build a house on.

QUESTION: *Do you have 'proudest moments' in wines that have been produced from your grapes? The Judgment of Paris goes without saying.*

Helen: Well, yes.

Charles: The sweepstakes. The Sonoma County Sweepstakes. We've done well there. It was a great idea to feature the vineyard instead of the winery, but anyway, it didn't last.



Fair sweepstakes winners Charles Bacigalupi, Peter Friedman and Helen Bacigalupi

234 medals awarded to wines at Harvest Fair

1984 Sweepstakes Win

Helen: And, the wine that was served at the White House. Our '82 Chardonnay was served in the White House, and of course we have a copy of the menu. It was a state dinner for Gandhi, the son, not the mother. And, Ronald Reagan was the president and Mr. Corti, over in Sacramento—Reagan knew him from being governor—and when they were having a state dinner, I guess they called up Mr. Corti, and I guess he recommended our 1982 Chardonnay, the Bacigalupi from Healdsburg Wine Growers, Inc. So, that was on the menu. I

once went to his store in Sacramento to thank him, but he wasn't there.

QUESTION: *So, 2010 has been a tough year? Have you known tough years before?*

Helen: Yes, this is just a very cyclical business. Yes, absolutely. There are lots of reasons for that, but if you don't know this is a cyclical business you can go out on a limb, and someone will saw it off for you. Some people expand in good times way beyond what they should, and that's the way to lose your business, your label, your land, everything. Our advice is to grow gradually. The families that have survived have not gone out on a limb, because they understand that this is a cyclical business. It seems like tough times come round every ten years. The families that have survived, like the Foppianos, the Pedroncellis, Demosthenes, they're still going. They never expanded too fast. I've always admired, too, Robert Mondavi's brother, at Charles Krug. Robert Mondavi did a lot for the wine business. Some people never understand that if you make yourself into a public corporation you lose control. People think that if you have

your family on the board you can control that corporation. Well, boy, that just doesn't work that way. Even with 50 per cent ownership, you can't control everything. His brother at Krug didn't go out on a limb, they are a beautiful family.

QUESTION: *Are you shocked by the price of ranch land today?*

Charles: Oh, yes.

Helen: Oh, my, yes. We sure are. The appreciation in value for land in the valley for vineyards has been astronomical, which is a problem for people like us who would like to leave our land to our children. We want to leave our land to our son, but with estate taxes being what they are, well, we don't know. The Wall Street Journal had this story about a French winery that had been in one family for ten or fifteen generations. I felt like writing a letter and saying it would be nice if we could even get to the second or third generation here. But, how are you going to do it with the tax situation? You can't do it. We can't even give it to our son because of gift tax with is 35 per cent now and will be worse after December 31. You have to sell your

property to get the cash. And, then the whole thing is gone. It's shot. The government will be taking more than your heirs will get, even if they have the cash. And, it causes people to do crazy things to avoid the tax.

QUESTION: *Why do you think Napa got the reputation for being all show biz and Sonoma's got the hard working, down-to-earth reputation?*

Helen: Well, for one thing, there are more families in Sonoma, and they live here. They live on the property, they are involved in the business, whereas Napa County, all these celebrities have come, including people like Nancy Pelosi (then the Speaker of the House in Washington). Would you believe that? There are so many absentee owners in Napa County, which is part of the problem over there. They don't live there, they aren't involved in the political situation. They can't vote there because they don't live there, so it's a whole different thing. But, more and more we are going to see the family vineyards gobbled up here in Sonoma County. It's inevitable. Looks like it.

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